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ABSTRACT

Many educators, students, parents and other taxpayers rely on the perception that literacy is some narrowly defined ideal, and that students must all conform to that ideal to become successful, (in other words) productive citizens. Sharon Crowley posits two ways of thinking about texts. In one, texts are discursive bits produced to engender more texts; they are produced to quell the desire for expression and are of worth because they reflect students' experiences and personalities. In the other, texts represent absolute values, an ideal, requiring conventions of style such as punctuation, tone and attribution. As they prepare their students for standardized tests, current-traditional teachers see student writing in the second way, as enabling students to emulate some externally mandated form of writing. Unfortunately, these practices not only discriminate against those students whose subculture does not prepare them to follow conventions of the mainstream but also breed false notions about the purposes of writing among all students. At some point, writing for students in this system ceases to have meaning; it is about filling space. An alternative to the standarized test approach would be portfolio assessments, for which students would revise a collection of their best work; it would further notions of writing aligned with Crowley's first definition. (Contains 13 references.) (TB)

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Go Refigure: Poststructuralist Notions of Literacy and Portfolio Assessment

In a recent column, George Will describes an apparent correlation between low per-pupil expenditures and high SAT scores. His argument against spending money to improve education pivots on the assumption that standardized test scores do indeed reveal more than academic success, that they reveal a level of literacy. A danger here, it seems to me, is that the results also indicate (fabricate) how far away the test takers fall from an acceptable literacy.

Many educators, students, parents, and other taxpayers rely on the perception that literacy is some narrowly defined ideal, and that students must all conform to that ideal in order to become successful, (in other words) productive citizens. The public's demand for accountability of educators and of students has reduced a significant segment of the education process to the mastery of objective, standardized tests which purport to represent a measurement of that ideal. Lester Faigley sees a connection between consumer desires of the 1980s and a fear of change, of moving from the comforts of an idealized past (49). The push from the public is for hard data to inform exactly where we succeed or fail as a nation, as a culture, and as individuals; in other words, how do the data show us in relation to other nations, cultures, or individuals. Meanwhile, as the validity of these tests becomes increasingly suspect, many students fall by the wayside, not necessarily because of any lack in intelligence or cognitive skills but because of differently refined test-taking strategies or a resistance to conformity or even a lack of interest in such a setting. What is necessary, then, is to (re)think through the premises behind such an objective view of literacy, and poststructuralism serves to analyze prioritized notions of learning and reinscribe them with formerly inferior notions. Further, poststructuralism tends to dismiss the seemingly tidy view of a grand narrative, thus recognizing that literacy, broadly defined, is more accurately a dynamic configuration of many and diverse

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micronarratives. Both of these poststructural gestures open up a variety of possibilities for accepted academic performance.

Sharon Crowley posits that there are at least two ways to think about texts. In one, texts are discursive bits produced to engender more texts; they are produced to quell the desire of writing rather than to represent some external referent (93). The writing has worth because it both reflects and constructs the students' personalities and experiences. The other definition claims that each text represents an Ideal Text with absolute values. These absolute values include boundaries of reading conventions--paragraphs, chapters, and books--but also include conventions of style such as punctuation, tone, and attribution (93). Now, these aren't the only two definitions of text, and Crowley doesn't suggest that they are. She does, however, delineate some of the disempowering effects of trying to identify and mimic an Ideal Text, and I want to extend her argument here.

Current-traditional teachers can be defined as those who tend to think that student writing is practice that enables these students to reach some desired goal, to emulate some externally mandated form of writing. I define the term current-traditional somewhat tentatively in light of Gary Tate's admonition that "any past pedagogical practice that has fallen into disfavor" has been too easily labeled "current-traditional." Tate ends his essay, however, with the recognition that "the term 'current-traditional rhetoric' will continue to stand for a wide range of beliefs and pedagogical practices that many contemporary teachers and scholars reject" (Tate n. pag.). The externally mandated form of writing is generally the product of an education committee or a teacher's memory of school writing assignments, and many standardized tests measure according to this form. For example, the state of Texas requires high school students to pass a standardized writing examination as part of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) before receiving their high school diplomas, regardless of the students' competent performance in their coursework. The students must write in a given "mode," usually labeled "persuasive," and their writing must follow prescribed guidelines. The students are even provided models of essays rated one through four, or poor to excellent. So the texts produced by the students before taking the TAAS serve no purpose other than to demonstrate the students' ability to imitate an Ideal Text, one whose criteria are determined by an unseen authority and established

without feedback from the very students (and teacher) who will participate in the writing.

Because so much is riding on these tests, the students' writing during the school year serves primarily as practice for a contrived writing situation that is perceived as an accurate indicator of writing proficiency. Students study the criteria for scoring a three or a four, read a practice writing prompt that may have little or no bearing on their own lives and interests, and then launch into a convincing written argument for or against the topic. Although these criteria seem, at first blush, to be rather broad, they are actually fairly rigid. For example, different amounts of elaboration reap different scores: one moderately elaborated reason in support of the writer's thesis is characteristic of a level 2 response, but two or more elaborated reasons would push the score to a level 3. Evidently, it makes little difference whether the writer feels that one elaborated reason is sufficient to argue the point; the writer is obligated to construct another reason for which he or she may not feel true conviction. And an important criterion to score a level 4 response is described on the handout thus: "Though the writer may not incorporate all the appropriate mechanics or conventions of language, the response is effective by virtue of its overall clarity of expression and fluency." The message here is that there is a finite number of "appropriate" conventions of writing and that the student has had ample opportunity to learn these conventions. While this last bit of advice for the test takers ostensibly values the overall clarity of the writing, the mere mention of a complete set of appropriate conventions is telling, indeed. The message suggests that there are some writing mechanics which affect the clarity of the writing simply because the evaluators have those conventions in mind.

Important to note, too, is the artificiality of the writing prompts and some possible ramifications of that artificiality on students' opinions about writing. If a result of the current-traditional axiology of composition instruction is student-generated texts spawned from a writing prompt, and if various populations of students fail to meet expectations of the evaluators, then it is certainly time to rethink the nature of these prompts. These prompts that are germane to students' expectations only on the most superficial level serve to elicit written responses that are fairly similar in form in order to facilitate evaluation. Writing samples that deviate too far from some established norm create a difficulty for evaluators working from a fairly rigid standard. In fact, the current-traditional pedagogy seems to have evolved from a desire to teach a form of writing that

can be held up as an Ideal Text and then discern students' writing ability, and even make predictions about students' future writing prowess, based on their conformity to that Ideal Text (Crowley 97). This teleological view of writing that constructs a somewhat clearly defined and bordered path diminishes the authority of students over their own writing and certainly colors the negotiating process among student peer group members and the teacher. Any empowerment comes from those evaluators, who are at once almost completely removed from the writing situations yet are always intrusively present. A poststructural refiguring of the tenets of current-traditionalism would allow the students both to empower themselves and to consider diverse audiences and rhetorical situations. Rather than work from a static writing prompt that every other test taker addresses, students could be provided opportunities to produce writing from their own concerns and experiences. They could turn in a portfolio of the writing they have worked on and revised, even with peer or teacher consultation, instead of a piece of writing developed in one sitting, one sweating. Although these portfolios, because of their diversity of topic, purpose, length, and other characteristics, would be more difficult and time-consuming to evaluate, they may represent better the writing abilities of the authors. Still it may be time to construct assessment opportunities that value personal texts that may have served other purposes and audiences.

In the spirit of time conservation, as well as grammar instruction, many writing tests contain an objective portion wherein the students must make stylistic decisions from a set number of options. In the TAAS test, as in others, more than one option may be considered grammatically correct, but the test takers must determine which response the test writers deem most "effective." For example, students are directed to "choose the best way to write each underlined section." A practice test yields this example of an underlined section: "In these zoos animals are free to wander large areas. Compatible species are grouped together." Although this pair of sentences is considered grammatically correct, and although "correct as is" is one of the options, a revision of them as one compound sentence with a conjunction is represented as the best way to rewrite the sentence. This objective segment of the test is machine scored. It is amenable to fast grading. It is also confined to allowing only one correct response per question. Students who, for whatever reasons, prefer to use the two short sentences in the above example will be questioned on their control of written communication. Compound sentences are esteemed

as indicators of higher writing skills. Deborah Brandt points out that such decontextualization "excuses inequity in a climate already steeped in inequities" by rewarding "mainstream" children for making connections between their social networks and acceptable school language while punishing children from "American subgroups" whose social networks lead to unacceptable, supposedly illiterate responses (194).

Another test posing similar problems is the General Educational Development (GED) test, used to grant the equivalent of a high school diploma to those who successfully pass it. The material on the GED and the criteria for passing it are derived from the samples of the curricula of a number of secondary schools. Also, the writing sample of the GED is graded holistically; in other words, as many as three readers rate each piece of writing based on their first impression of that writing and on the performance of other writers in that particular group of test takers. It would appear, then, that the GED is a product of social epistemology because it is constructed and scored on the basis of the performance of a particular community, American high school students. But the GED is still encumbered by its reliance on an Ideal Text. Those who take the test must answer a number of objective questions that purport to demonstrate writing skill. Certainly most of the test items address grammatical conventions that are widely accepted as appropriate to Standard English. However, one section of the test, Sentence Revising I, asks the test takers "to select the best way to rewrite a sentence or combine two sentences." The following is an example:

I have a headache. I don't have time to lie down now.

Although I have a headache, I don't have time to lie down now.

The test takers are allowed only one option, represented as the "correct" answer. Further, they are compelled to join the sentence without any clue as to why such a conjunction is desirable. Those who feel comfortable with the two short sentences and understood conjunction, or who picture an audience likewise comfortable with them, set themselves up for disappointment in their test results. They also expose themselves to the (false) notion that there exists an Ideal Text and that they do not practice its rituals.

Poststructuralism, specifically deconstruction, would reverse the hierarchy of an Ideal Text that can be represented by such rigidly evaluated testing instruments contrasted with student-generated, possibly even student-inspired texts that reflect concerns of their authors and may have been written

for other situations and under other circumstances than this particular evaluation of writing. However, a simple inversion would not be enough; a reinscription of the notion of the evaluative instrument into the notion of student-inspired texts is necessary. This movement involves a two-part interpretation of texts or events (Davis 410). The first part is a reversal of binary opposites, and usually the first term is preferred over the second. But this inversion calls attention to the status quo regarding the concepts. The second part involves reinscribing the newly inferior term into the class of the newly superior one in an effort to avoid merely inverting the hierarchy. This reinscribing is necessarily violent and "operates within the order of the pure signifier which no reality, no absolute external reference, no transcendental signified can come to limit, bound, or control" (Derrida 89). Because the traditional perceptions of the opposed concepts are challenged and refigured, not simply inverted, there arises a violent exchange between the terms and between allegiances toward the formerly superior one and the newly superior one. This reversal and reinscription would, of course, disrupt the procedures of accountability that many people such as educators, parents, legislators, and other tax-payers deem valid and requisite, but such a disruption can point out the fallacy of subscribing to a transcendental form of writing or to any credibility that writing for one situation is worthwhile practice for writing in any situation. A somewhat preconceived perception of effective writing might well facilitate evaluation of writing, as well as facilitate instruction designed primarily, if not exclusively, to elicit such writing. But many writers may feel unnecessarily alienated by repressing their own texts to make time for producing surrogates of some purported Ideal Text.

The literacy of various academic institutions, then, is represented on these and similar tests as monolithic. That is, to master "literacy" in one academic setting is to become competent in all academic and corporate settings. Just before describing a writing course that foregrounds an interactive literacy, the practice of examining discourses of oneself and of others, Cathy Fleischer spells out how such a monolithic perception of literacy is more damaging than beneficial to writers. Fleischer tells of a former student who had written quite a bit until she had been in the university for a couple of years. Then the student felt she was "no longer writing" but merely "fulfilling requirements" (183). It would be naive to suppose that Fleischer or any other writing teacher proposes that all writing be generated strictly from students'

desires. Instead, we (must) recognize the importance of some kind of audience for student writing, whether that audience be the teacher, a group of peers, a roomful of attentive listeners, or, on occasion, the writer alone. But all of these rhetorical situations give the students more involvement in negotiating the criteria for assessment. All these situations are fairly localized, so the students can write, receive feedback, rewrite, argue, and so on until the moment of final assessment defines the text as finished. Certainly there is still the possibility that these rhetorical situations may be closed off, that the students must surrender enough of themselves to produce a model of the text that the teacher prefers (psychology paper and such), but those teachers who perceive writing as a means of learning and who view learning as inquiry rather than recitation will invite dialogue, even dialectic, during the writing process.

Using a portfolio of writing as large-scale assessment is not new. Almost ten years ago Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff used portfolio assessment as a substitute for proficiency examinations at Stony Brook (336). Their project sent the students' portfolios to a committee of teachers exclusive of the teacher of those students. But the students' teacher retained the right to disagree with any of the other reader's results and could then ask for a different reader. Also, if there were one weak paper in the portfolio, the student had the opportunity to rewrite the paper. This assessment is marked by coaching and negotiation, the way we like to think that most non-student writing is or should be marked.

Even so, there are a number of problems associated with supplanting standardized tests with portfolio assessment and with reinscribing portfolio assessment with characteristics of standardized testing. To begin, such assessment is time consuming, and even more so when applied to a significantly larger population such as graduating high school seniors. Perhaps a localization of the testing procedure is the only solution here. Rather than send all the materials to Princeton or to the state capital, institutions and individuals might send the materials to regional centers which hire teachers to read and evaluate portfolios. The more localized the process, the better will be the communication among all the participants, in contrast to the faceless authority of the standardized tests. I might add that the results from standardized, objective tests take many weeks to return, even though the tests are easily and quickly scored.

A related and daunting problem with this supplanting involves cost. Imagine the funds required to set up assessment workshops, work spaces, and

evaluators' salaries. However, according to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, the nation already spends $500 million each year writing, administering, and grading standardized tests (Holloway 18A). Portfolio assessment would negate the need for funding writing and administering examinations. Also, the portfolios can serve a number of purposes: graduation from one level of schooling to the next, admission to a particular institution or program, and so forth.

Another difficulty is that, for convenience, there might arise in portfolio assessment an almost stifling rubric that ultimately may be no improvement over the writing exams described earlier in this paper. Anson and Brown address these problems in a program of portfolio assessment that spans many of the disciplines at the University of Minnesota. They collected "multiple samples of writing, gathered over time from various contexts [which] would more fully represent a student's level of achievement than a test essay" (253). Thus, they made peace with the idea that convenience does not necessarily justify assessment processes. Also, they recognized the various ideologies at work in their institution affecting the teaching and assessing of writing: the cultural, institutional, departmental, and personal ideologies. But they remain optimistic: "We learned not that change is hopeless but that it must always begin with cultural understandings" (267). Anson and Brown have opened up a space to begin thinking about how to assess a large number of portfolios without comparing them to an Ideal Portfolio in the face of institutional pressure to do just that. In order to contextualize the samples, perhaps the portfolios might contain, along with a number of texts, the assignment sheets that elicited each of those texts as well as a paper trail of peer and teacher comments and earlier drafts. It may turn out that the primary function of such assessment is not to determine a percentile rank or even a pass/fail signification but to increase the coaching and collaboration that go on before the "final product" is sent off for evaluation. After all, what are the consequences of failing a portfolio of student papers that, individually, were passed by the teachers who made the assignments? It is important to leave continuing communication open among writers, teachers, and evaluators. In other words, it may turn out that everyone passes at some point.

Just as there are different types and uses of portfolios, standardized tests don't fit quite so neatly into a metanarrative. However, they do share certain traits, whether norm-referenced or criteria-based. They serve to categorize

individuals based on one artificial performance (artificial because tests reflect test-taking skills more than anything else). Also, standardized testing has had an almost hypnotic hold over much of the nation for a number of years; not many in the general public seem to question its principles, although many do question the validity of this test or that one. It will be difficult to persuade the general public to replace traditional testing with the widespread submission of writing portfolios reinscribed with the notions of evaluation. We probably should not shrink from such a difficulty, though, if we value a diversity of literacies and of rhetorical situations. We should not shrink from it if we agree with Grant Wiggins that the face validity of tests does not address or even encourage the "'messy' uses of knowledge in context--the 'doing' of a subject" (qtd. in "Clean Tests" 9). Also, we should not shrink from it if we understand that learning--especially through writing--is open ended rather than merely classificatory, necessitating a more nurturing rather than punitive and final evaluation. Kurt Spellmeyer says:

> If there is a crisis of literacy, we will not overcome it unless we renew something more than "basic skills," and if it happens that we should continue to talk about writing and reading in isolation, then I feel certain that we will face at some point a genuine failure of the written word. (ix)

I suspect that many tax payers are reading George Will, William Bennett and Lynne Cheney rather than Spellmeyer, Faigley, or Crowley. But if we sold portfolio assessment as real writing, something less decontextualized than standardized, objective tests and something that writers and artists and advertisers and others in non-scholastic settings participate in, then portfolio assessment may receive enough public support to supplant traditional testing.

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